DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 091 704 CS 201 297

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TITLE How Not to Teach Black Students: The Confessions of an Ex-Formula Man.
PUB DATE Apr 74
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting and Conference of the College English Association (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *College Instruction; Composition (Literary); English Instruction; *Literature Appreciation; *Negro Students; Negro Youth; *Teaching Methods; Workshops

ABSTRACT

Teaching black students on a nonurban and nearly all-white campus is challenging, especially as blacks tend to be cautious. For this reason, two literature teaching methods--formula-think (use of general formulas, which both encourages literary imperialism and leaves the student without tools for future literary comprehension at the end of the course) and ego-busting (which fuels the black student's self-doubt)--must be avoided. One solution is a literature workshop approach, in which students are assigned to read and write a short paper about a literary work which has been introduced with basic historical and critical facts. After papers are graded, they are discussed by both students and instructor in a classroom workshop. Frequent individual conferences are also held, and final grading is based on the papers chosen by students as their best work. As a result, the students' active engagement in literary study increases their confidence in approaching literature. (JM)

ED 091704

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HOW NOT TO TEACH BLACK STUDENTS:

THE CONFESSIONS OF AN EX-FORMULA MAN

I'm a man of strong prejudice, as who is not? As a basic element of human nature, prejudice is much like one's sex life: everybody has some, even if there's only a little bit, and even if it's purely cerebral. But I hasten to say that as far as I can tell, I'm not racially prejudiced. I should be, probably; it's natural enough to despise the Other or at least that which looks more like (my concept of) the Other than it does like me. But I don't feel that way about other races and I never have; maybe it was the way I was brought up. Anyway, all that latent prejudice has got to come out somehow, and if it's only natural to despise the Other, it's just as natural to despise the Former Self: no one is more virulent than the anti-Semitic Jew, and--according to my churchgoing friends--reformed whores still sing the loudest in church.

The Former Self I can't abide is hard to describe, but for the moment let us say that he is a certain kind of literature teacher who might be called a Formula Person because the formula in his favorite and, indeed, sole tool of literary criticism. A formula is a key which puts the work of art at the mercy of the key-holder, who can go in and come out at his leisure. All the Formula Person has to do is equip his students with, say, the Keats Formula ("all poems are based on Keats's idea of the Pleasure Thermometer"), give them the anthology, and away they go: rushing through Keats like razors, piling poems on the left and right. The Formula Person is happy, of course;

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he has, as inventor of the formula, demonstrated his cleverness ("I thought it up"). Too, his domain is intact: though the students are ruthless with poor Keats, they can't lay a finger on the profession of English because the Formula Person has proved to them that literary criticism is a kind of detective game and that only the Formula People have the clues. There's only one way to get the clues, or formulas, and that's by going to grad school. Until then, sit there and shut up: I know more about it than you do, because I've been.

You'd think that students, especially today's students, wouldn't put up with that kind of spurious elitism, but they do. Why? Because they feel a compelling need for objectivity. For most of them, the college years represent the only period in their lives when virtually everything they believe in is, at one time or another, brought into question (by a cynical roommate if not a cynical professor) and therefore they want, if not the same old answer, at least some answer. Too--and let's be practical, because they are--there's always the final exam, and they know that even the most scatterbrained instructor is going to be looking for cold data.

The problem with formula-think is that it encourages literary imperialism. The formula is a bayonet and the student becomes a foot soldier. Armed with the formula, he bullies the work into submission, makes it roll on its back with all four paws in the air. But it should be the other way around. The student doesn't need literature to reinforce the values that a materialistic, anti-intellectual culture has given him. Good literature should question the student's values. If the values are sound, they'll stand up to the questioning; if they're not, they'll go under (at least temporarily: we have to remember that most students not only come from but also return to the bogus culture that made them). In a word, literature should (again, at least temporarily)

overwhelm the student, terrify him, fill him with doubt and confusion, and the teacher should be right there with him to fight for fright's sake and repel the Formula People as they rush down the aisles.

There's another drawback to formula-think: even though it turns the student into a classroom bully-boy, it leaves him defenseless when he's on his own again. In Straw for the Fire, Theodore Roethke remembers a student saying, "You carry us farther than we could ever go alone. Then when you're gone, it's too much to face." This withdrawal of support probably accounts for many if not most of our graduate applicants: graduate school is where the real power is, because that's where the real formula-think occurs.

For these reasons, I rejected formula-think several years ago and for a while there was a lot of ego-busting in my classes (as Roethke says, "I used to teach like killing snakes: a constant pressuring"). The ego-busting method worked fine for me, except when I tried it on black students. How do you bust ego when there's no ego to bust? It might be different at another type of school where the blacks aren't quite so isolated, but my university, like many others, is non-urban and nearly all white, and therefore most of its black students are doing everything they can simply to stay alive. Being isolated, they tend to be cautious, and they are encouraged to be cautious by others; their families and even their academic counselors, for the most part, urge them to play the game according to its rules. So who am I to come along, just about the time that a black undergraduate thinks that he's learned how to do literature, and tell him where to get off? The white student thinks that he's got it made, and I'm out to disabuse him of that notion. The black student wonders if he'll ever have it made, and I don't think that I should fuel his doubt. (Remember, I'm talking about the majority of black students: there are a few canny Br'er Rabbits on campus, but not many.)

The problem is to avoid the perils of both [ego-] busting and formula-think, and though there are doubtless a variety of solutions, here's one that works for me. As I've already mentioned, I rejected formula-think several years ago, mainly because it wasn't giving me the kind of results I wanted. At the same time, it seemed to me that I was doing a fairly good job with both black and white students in writing courses, where formula-think is unworkable, but not in literature courses. And even though ego-busting worked with white students in literature courses, it only increased the distance between me and the black students. For a brief, despairing moment, I flirted with a third alternative: Gadget-Think, or the Hardware Syndrome. It seemed ~~to me then~~ as though everybody but me had closed-circuit television, tape-slide units, overhead projectors, cassettes, computer games, and so on. But then I thought, who needs technology? There's a fourth alternative: why not handle the literature course (which isn't working) as though it were a writing workshop (which is)? That's what I did and do: early in the week I assign a paper on new material; when the papers come in, I grade them and then we have a workshop on that set of papers. I read excerpts from insightful papers and give my own interpretation of the material as well; at the end of the workshop, I assign more reading and a paper topic for the following week. I spend at least two hours of class time each week having individual conferences with students; if the class is unusually large, I set up extra office hours outside of class to make sure that I confer privately with each student at least three or four times per term. (The paper-grading and conferences take up a lot of time, but then I don't have to prepare lectures.) Result: before very long, the students are a lot more confident in their approach to literature because they've learned to actively engage the literary work itself instead of passively watching me do it. Too, I can better handle individual problems

through papers and conferences: ego-busting here, ego-building there, as the case requires.

As the term progresses, it's especially rewarding for me to watch the critical capacity grow in my black students. And I'm not being paternalistic--as I suggested earlier, it would be otherwise on an urban campus where the racial proportions are different, but where I teach, the black student has been conditioned to play it safe, and when playing it safe amounts to near-total passivity, some changes need to be made.

Let's be thankful that we don't teach auto repair and brain surgery the way we teach literature. Still, it seems sometimes as though the only show in town is run by the Formula Man, the teacher-magician pulling rabbits out of a hat. I think we're teaching everybody wrong, white as well as black. Like Buckminster Fuller, I think that people can't be changed but that systems can, and that the result is the same as if you changed the people. In my case, I had to learn how not to teach black students before I could develop a method that doesn't discriminate against race, color, sex, or creed, even though it's hell on formula-think.

* * *

As you were interested enough to accompany me on this autobiographical journey from formula-think to ego-busting past gadget-think to the workshop method, perhaps you'll be interested now in a specific application of the method. Let's say that the class is the standard 3-hour course in "American Literature, 1865-1914." On the first day of class I discuss with the students some practical principles of literary criticism: the work should be complex, it should be coherent; the reader must study it faithfully to determine the work's unique internal consistency that makes it unlike other works yet which places it within the tradition of literature; the reader must begin and end with the language of

the text; he must be faithful to the entire work and never mistake a part for the whole, and so on. On the second and third days I make some general remarks on American cultural and literary history and end with a discussion of the transition from Romanticism to Realism. Having given the students some basic critical and historical tools and having suggested further readings in those areas, I then assign a paper of about 500 words, due at the first class session of the following week. If the topic is, say, Emily Dickinson as Transitional Poet, I ask the students to read perhaps half a dozen particular poems, to be alert to both Romantic and Realistic elements in those poems, and to write a succinct summary of their findings.

At the first class session of the second week, all students turn in their papers and I use that period to have my first few conferences; the students not scheduled for conferences are free to start thinking about the second assignment, which I've written on the board. I have more conferences at the second session and, by the third session of the second week, I'll have read and commented on all the papers and prepared for presentation of them in a workshop session which all students attend (the conferences that I've had earlier are useful in that they help me to decide which points to emphasize in the workshop session). In a typical hour-long workshop, I read passages--both "good" and "bad," as long as they're stimulating in some way--from about a dozen papers and solicit criticism from the other students; by term's end, every student will have come in for some peer criticism at least two or three times. The nice part about the workshop sessions is their inherent economy: everyone gets a double return on the time and energy that he or she invests, since the students are discussing simultaneously the poems of Dickinson and their own treatment of them. At the end of the workshop, I remind the students of the assignment for the third week, and the whole process begins again. At

certain points in the term, and certainly on the last day of class, I'll pause to summarize what the class as a whole has learned to that point.

A note on the conferences--they're not as easy as one might think. You can run out of conversation awfully quickly, particularly if you're dealing with a reticent student, so it helps to be ready to mention collateral points or look at a new poem together or try to find out if the student likes or dislikes Emily Dickinson and for what reasons. If the class is small enough, you'll get to see each student at least every two or three weeks; if the class is larger, you might want to schedule extra conference time outside class. Ideally, I suppose that teacher and student should discuss every paper, but since the students have the teacher's comments on every paper in addition to frequent peer criticism in the workshop sessions, once-a-week conferences aren't an absolute necessity.

That brings us to grading. I've found that it's too time-consuming to worry over letter grades for each individual paper; instead, I make my marginal comments as explicit as possible and, at the end of the term, I ask each student to give me his five best (in his opinion) papers in a manilla folder, and I base the final grade on that as well as such matters as class attendance and participation. (Needless to say, the students are required to write all the papers that are assigned, even though they turn in only five at the end of the course.) Students tend to consider this method of grading a fair one since it calls for a certain amount of real work on the part of the teacher as well as the student and since it isn't predicated on the spurious notion of "progress"--it's okay for you to tell your students that they're going to enter your course as ignoramuses and emerge as geniuses, but don't blame them if they're a little skeptical; after all, that's what their teachers told them last term.

Earlier I suggested some of the benefits of the workshop method; an obvious one that hasn't been sufficiently emphasized is that even though it encourages the useful interchange that can only take place in a community of scholars, it also encourages education on a one-to-one basis, and, as a white teacher of black students on a largely white campus, I can't allow myself to overlook the importance of that kind of contact, not only for their sakes but for my sake as well. I don't know how much I've taught the black students who have been in my classes, but I know one thing they've taught me: that we're teaching everybody wrong.